

Rough Guide to Outcomes

The guide emphasises that effective practice is not about the number of tasks completed or services delivered, but about the real difference made to children's lives.

Its purpose is to help practitioners focus on what changes for the child as a result of support, intervention, and partnership working.

What Outcomes Are:

An outcome is a noticeable difference for a child, a group of children, or a wider population that happens as a result of services and interventions. Outcomes are the benefits or changes that result from the work practitioners do. They may emerge over a week, several months, or longer. Outcomes can include changes in attitudes, behaviour, values, knowledge, skills, or circumstances. Examples include increased confidence, improved literacy, greater independence, better communication, financial stability, or being safe from violence, bullying, or harmful substances. In some cases, maintaining a stable situation is also a positive outcome if deterioration has been prevented.

What Outcomes Are Not:

Outcomes are often confused with inputs, processes, activities, and outputs. Inputs are the resources used to do the work, such as staff, money, buildings, and equipment. Processes and activities are the actions taken, such as recruiting staff, assessing needs, or delivering sessions. Outputs are the products of those actions, such as newly appointed staff, assessment reports, meals provided, visits completed, or parenting classes delivered. These are not outcomes. If something can be counted, touched, or easily moved, it is probably an output rather than an outcome. The key question is always: so what difference did this make for the child?

Why Outcomes Matter:

Focusing on outcomes is essential because children's services exist to improve children's lives, not simply to complete tasks. Outcomes provide accountability to children, families, managers, taxpayers, and decision-makers by showing whether public services are making a positive difference. They give context and meaning to work, help children and young people recognise their own progress, and keep practitioners and families focused on what everyone is working towards. Starting with outcomes also encourages more creative and effective planning because support can be designed around the end result rather than around routine activity.

Six Steps to Improving Outcomes for Children

1. **Start with the result and work backwards.** After assessment, decide with the child, parents, and relevant partners what specifically needs to change or be sustained. Desired outcomes should be clear, positive, and specific, for example: improved literacy, better management of epilepsy, increased confidence, or safety from dangerous drugs in the home.
2. **Agree how success will be recognised.** Outcomes are hard to measure directly, so practitioners need indicators that show progress. These may include what a child can now do, what they have achieved, or what qualities or skills they have gained. For example, if the outcome is safety from bullying, indicators might include improved school attendance, greater independence, increased friendships, and stronger self-esteem.
3. **Describe outcomes positively.** Focus on what should improve rather than only on what should stop. For example, instead of stating that a child should stop self-harming, a more useful outcome may be increased self-esteem and confidence, with reduced self-harm incidents used as an indicator.
4. **Identify who can help.** Outcomes are rarely achieved by one practitioner alone. Children, parents, carers, schools, health staff, and social workers may all need to contribute, so outcomes should be shared across the network of support.
5. **Agree actions and timescales.** Everyone should know who will do what and by when. Actions such as attending a parenting course are not outcomes in themselves; they are steps intended to support a longer-term result, such as a more stable and affectionate parent-child relationship. Timescales should always be specific.
6. **Monitor progress regularly.** Reviews should begin and end with the agreed outcomes, not only with whether actions were completed. Practitioners should track the indicators identified at the start to judge whether meaningful change is happening. If progress is limited, support should be adapted rather than repeating ineffective actions.

Key Practical Messages and Examples

The guide stresses that outcomes must be about end results for children, not just service activity or family satisfaction. Children and parents should be involved in setting outcomes from the start because this increases understanding, commitment, and motivation. Indicators should reflect real change and may draw on self-reports, practitioner observation, school feedback, health reports, and family feedback. The examples in the guide illustrate this clearly. A health outcome such as enjoying a healthy lifestyle might be indicated by a balanced diet, physical activity, reduced tooth decay, healthy weight, and appropriate clothing for the weather, with supporting data gathered from school attendance records, club participation, school nurse and dentist checks, family support observations, and the child's own views. An emotional wellbeing outcome such as increased confidence and self-esteem might be indicated by fewer self-harming incidents, more participation in group activities, fewer negative statements about self, and willingness to try new things. A school readiness outcome might be shown by getting along with other children, following simple directions, sitting still for short periods, basic self-care skills, and up-to-date immunisations.

Conclusion

In summary, the guide argues that good practice in children's services depends on a clear focus on outcomes: the real changes that improve children's lives. Practitioners should begin by identifying the result they want for the child, agree indicators that show progress, involve the right people, link actions directly to outcomes, and review progress against evidence of change. The central message is simple: doing more activity is not enough unless it leads to meaningful, positive results for children and young people.